

Wildlike: “Don’t Run, Got It.”

People embark into the wilderness to find out who they are and what they are, seeking to distance themselves from what they know and find familiar, often learning more than they either expected or wanted. People do not go into the wilderness to seek solitude, but to seek surroundings consistent with the loneliness they already feel. Sometimes this loneliness comes from death – of a father, a wife, or a brother – but because death touches everyone and is inescapable, survivors share a commonality of experience that paradoxically links them in their loneliness.

Wildlike follows a 14-year-old girl from Seattle cast adrift in Alaska by the adults in her life at an age when there should be someone to take care of her, old enough that she might be able to take care of herself if she knew just a little bit more than she does. Because this happens in Alaska, amidst breathtaking mountain vistas and limitless expanse, she finds herself on the run in Denali National Park where an experienced backpacker offers survival advice:

“Never approach a bear or a moose or whatever. Don’t approach them. If a bear charges you, then–“

“I know what I’m doing.”

“You have no idea. But whatever you do, don’t run. Do – not – run. Don’t run.”

“Don’t run, got it.”

Bears both literal and metaphorical are not the only threat. The girl flies from Seattle to Juneau, which is surrounded by terrain so forbidding that roads cannot be built through it, making the city functionally an island because the only ways in and out are by air or sea. Yet no one is an island entire of itself, even in millions of acres of wilderness. Everyone here both needs to be taken care of and to take care of someone else, often in more ways than one.

The 14-year-old girl is “Mackenzie” presumably as a result of a faddish burst of popularity for the name around the time of her birth, and there is a hint that her mother might have been paying unconscious tribute to Spuds Mackenzie, the beer spokesdog. She is convincingly played by then-16 year-old Ella Purnell in her first lead role, whose previous credits include the younger version of Keira Knightley’s character in *Never Let Me Go* and the teenage version of the title character in Disney’s *Maleficent*. She is simultaneously impulsive and introspective, simultaneously fearless and fearful, as 14-year-old girls are when facing a series of traumas. She arrives in Alaska to stay with her uncle (Brian Geraghty), a situation that, in an extreme understatement, does not go well. Her guesses about who can and cannot be trusted are often wrong. The backpacker who meets her in a chance encounter (Bruce Greenwood) turns out to be as lost and as directionless as she is, only more experienced and better prepared. The film’s title is a double-pun: ‘wild-like’ by definition is not wild and it alludes to “child-like,” which by definition is not a child, neither-here-nor-there straddling of boundaries.

This process of gradual emotional revelation proceeds among a small but steady supply of seekers, including a group traveling in a handmade airplane looking for wide open spaces in which to fly their handmade kites. Dialogue is crisp but sparse, as befits being immersed in wilderness. The cinematography is stunning, conveying a sense of the true romance of wilderness hiking, so well done that many viewers may be motivated to visit the beautiful terrain for themselves. Denali is hardly

wasteland, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. This is not *Walkabout*. This film is neither a travelogue nor a “coming of age” genre exercise: it is a story about people who share similarly traumatic loss and grief, each working out for themselves how to shape their corner of the world afterward in ways that work uniquely for them, sometimes by connecting with and trusting each other.

Whether seekers in the wilderness find what they are looking for depends upon figuring out what that is, and sometimes they may need to find it first in order to realize it is the very thing sought. This is a strong film where many things, as in life, do not have neat solutions.

Widlike, written and directed by Frank Hall Green, at the Southeastern New England (SENE) Film Festival, Mon (4/20), 6pm, Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, PVD. senefest.com/mon-film-screenings.html Contains non-explicit dramatic scenes and references that could be disturbing to some, including of child sexual molestation.